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THE 5 BEST BIG-CITY MAYORS

They rule over tough territory, yet offer strong examples of how cities can be efficient and livable

MARTIN O'MALLEY / BALTIMORE

Wonk 'n' Roller

TWICE SINCE MARTIN O'MALLEY WAS elected mayor six years ago, Baltimore has been hit by blizzards. Each time, he had city workers phone as many as 25,000 elderly residents to ensure they were O.K. Then he had cops punch through the drifts, carrying bread, milk and toilet paper to those seniors running low. That's a snow job voters appreciate, and it helped re-elect O'Malley with 87% of the vote last year.

O'Malley, 42, has mastered that kind of retail politicking as a lifelong political buff. His parents met while working at the Democratic National Committee, and he was doing cheers for Hubert Humphrey by age 3. Gary Hart bought him his first legal beer at 21. O'Malley grew up in Washington's tony Maryland suburbs but fell hard for blue-collar Baltimore while attending the University of Maryland's law school there.

His urban innovations—primarily CitiStat, a computerized score sheet intended to make key city agencies like public works, housing, transportation and police more accountable—have brought other curious mayors on pilgrimages to Baltimore. "We've moved from a traditional, spoils-based system of patronage politics to a results-based system of performance politics," O'Malley says.

Cities traditionally measure the performance of municipal agencies at annual budget drills. But Citistat regularly confronts officials with citizens' complaints about broken streetlights or inadequate policing, allowing authorities to shift personnel and resources as needed. Every two weeks, managers head to see O'Malley or his top aides on the sixth floor of city hall to account for how well they have done just that. Workers who fare well can end up with Orioles tickets; managers who fall short have wound up with pink slips. The program has saved the city $100 million, O'Malley aides say. Last year Harvard University praised CitiStat for slashing overtime paid to city workers and cutting absenteeism in half at some agencies.

Thanks in part to O'Malley, Baltimore may be on the cusp of a renaissance. Its population slide—from nearly 1 million in 1950 to almost 650,000 today—has almost bottomed out. Commercial building permits jumped from $23 million in 2002 to $488 million last year. Such news heartens Baltimore residents, who sometimes jokingly call themselves Balti-morons for living in a city so grim it inspired NBC's *Homicide: Life on the Street* series. Drug use and crime in general are down, although O'Malley has only slightly dented the murder rate, which is five times New York's.

The telegenic O'Malley is known for his brashness, a trait honed by years of fronting a Celtic rock band and being the eldest son among six siblings. He briefly gained national attention in February for saying that in cutting urban aid, President George W. Bush "is attacking America's cities" in much the same way that the 9/11 hijackers did. His fellow mayors grimaced, and O'Malley quickly backed off the analogy. He also attracted headlines when rumors he was having an extramarital affair ("despicable lies," O'Malley said) exploded into public view, and Republican Governor Robert Ehrlich fired an aide for spreading the story on the Internet.

Recently the mayor announced he was leaving his band, O'Malley's March, to concentrate on his day job. As he hung up his guitar at his last St. Patrick's Day show, he urged his fans to pick up green-and-white bumper stickers. They read O'MALLEY FOR GOVERNOR. ***—By Mark Thompson/Washington***

ERIKA LARSEN—REDUX FOR TIME

BALTIMORE
O'Malley takes a tour of the city's inner harbor on a police patrol boat